

NBFO: Jane Galvin-Lewis, Deborah Singletary, Eugenia Wilshire, 26 April 1997, Brooklyn, NY- 1

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[Asked Galvin-Lewis where she works, etc.: left the Federal government and now works on Long Island with the homeless and chronic mentally ill (service provider)]

D: Are we black feminists now?

J: I think I am, but well...

E: War weary...been in the trenches.

D: We're what?

J: War weary.

K: War weary warriors?

J: War weary warriors---that's nice. What is interesting to me---what I find very interesting is that in all these years no one has gone out again. The younger women, y'know, that it just hasn't happened again. It will but I just find it very interesting that it hasn't happened so far.

K: I think that's why for me the project is important to figure out what happened and why it happened.

J: Well, I think one of the basic lessons that we really needed to, and I think we have, learned is that you have to--~~when dealing in this arena I think you've got to be very clear about the goals and the aspirations and the whole focus of the group.~~ Because I know one of the many problems that we had was that we were so needed that people from every corner of the globe--in terms of emotions and sexual preference and ideology and politics--all descended on NBFO because we were the only thing at that time and so the forces then began to pull against each other. That wasn't the whole story but that certainly was one of the many pieces. I don't think I can remember one meeting where we didn't have not one ideological debate. From the beginning to the very end.

* decline-
demands
on org.

K: I want to get into some of those, but do you mind if I go chronologically. Okay. So Jane how long did you participate in the organization? From the beginning to the end?

J: Uh-huh.

K: There was a meeting that was convened---some things say it was convened by Margaret Sloan and others say it was convened by Doris Wright...a meeting of thirty women in 1973.

J: Who's Doris Wright?

K: Do you remember a smaller meeting before the group actually got off the ground?

J: Yeah, I think that was the hair parlor meeting. I'm not sure who convened it but I'm quite sure it was Margaret Sloan. I don't know a Doris Wright that hung there with us.

K: It was in a hair parlor?

J: Yeah.

K: Deborah, how about you? How did you get involved with NBFO?

D: How did I get involved? I read an article in the *Daily News* [?] announcing that there was a group forming and I remember Jane Galvin-Lewis' picture was there and she was so beautiful along with

Margaret Sloan. I liked the photographs (laughing) so I decided to call and I went to---I think that was their first public meeting.

J: Yes.

D: The first meeting they announced to the public at large.

E: In the church.

D: I'm not even sure it was in the church. I'm not even sure I even thought about feminism before or thought about myself as a feminist, but when I heard that black feminists were convening then I knew that that was where I belonged and I went to that first meeting.

K: So you didn't have any hesitation over the use of the word "feminist"?

D: Not at all. Not for a moment.

K: And Eugenia, how about you?

E: I read something somewhere. It could have been the *Daily News*. I thought it was a community paper, but it was something about a meeting at a church. And I didn't even know how long the organization had existed or not, but it just said there was a meeting in a church and it was black feminists and it gave the time and it was in my neighborhood and I said, "That's for me." So I went.

K: And do you remember was that at the beginning when the organization started?

E: Uh, yeah. That was the first meeting---official ever meeting.

J: The first one that was open to the public. I think it was the first one after the press conference.

E: Because they had to be planning meetings before the [inaudible] one. [what did they do in these meetings?] minor statement?

J: We had planning meetings and we had the meeting in the beauty parlor and then we had a couple of other meetings. And then we had another meeting where Flo Kennedy, Eleanor Holmes Norton and Gloria Steinem.

K: Okay, Gloria Steinem was there also?

J: At the press conference.

E: I don't even remember that.

J: No, because the meeting that you came to was after that. I think that the publicity that Deborah and Eugenia saw was probably generated by that press conference. We had a lot---the press turned out in force. And we hit the papers that afternoon and that was another one of our problems.

D: The press and the CIA (laughter) We'll get to that later.

J: The press and the CIA. As they say on the news, "And now this..." Yes, chile. Was the fact that we got that publicity, which we wanted but we did not have any idea---no idea whatsoever how huge the response would be. And we got calls calls calls calls calls.

K: And where did you receive the calls?

J: At the Women's Action Alliance office that allowed us to use their lines and we also had a little room in their office.

K: That was in Manhattan?

J: Yes.

D: Where was that located? Forty-second street?

J: Forty first and Lex. MS. was in there---it was M-S then. Ms. now. Ms. was in there and the Alliance was either right upstairs or right downstairs 'cause there was that little door you could run between.

K: I recall seeing each of your names as some point in NBFO newsletters. Why don't you tell me what roles each of you played---

D: We had a newsletter?

J: (laughter) Deborah's so stupid. I can't stand her.

E: I don't remember either.

J: Yeah we did. We had a newsletter.

D: We did?

J: Yeah we did.

[interruption]

K: Yeah. What committees you were on or if you---because I read something that I was telling you about that said you were the vice-president of the organization, but you said that you weren't.

J: I was. At one point and time. I was a kind of cook and bottle washer, but I think I was vice-president at one time.

K: So it did have offices like that?

J: Yes. And then we went from that format---we made the drastic, in my opinion, grave error of attempting egalitarianism and going with a coordinating council. Which the only good point about that was that there was some wonderful people on it. On the coordinating council. [when did this switch occur?]

K: Was that seven people usually.

J: I think so yeah.

K: Do you remember who those people were?

J: It was---Deborah was on. You were on weren't you, Eugenia?

E: I don't remember.

J: There was Eugenia. I was on. Margaret.

D: Wasn't my sister on at one point?

J: Yes. Inez was on. Diane Lacy. It was Diane Lacy, Inez, Deborah, Eugenia, Jane, and Margaret. And Snell Bell. *when? resigned? guess: prior to resignation*

E: Florence Wright---um---the consumer [inaudible] woman.

J: Was she on?

E: I'm asking. I don't know. Maybe not.

D: What is her name?

J: That Florence. Remember the consumer affairs woman.

D: Oh, right, right. No, I don't think she was ever on coordinating council.

K: So what did the coordinating council do? [no answer] Besides coordinate? Oversee the day-to-day operations? Run the meetings?

J: We divided the work, we ran the meetings, we did the agendas, we did the press with the various committees. See that was the whole point of having a coordinating council instead of president, vice-president, treasurer, all that kind of thing was to spread the decision over the group.

K: And so did that work better than having the officers?

J: No. Not in my opinion.

K: No. What about the other two of you? Do you recall?

D: I never realized that the coordinating council was the problem. Did we have in-fighting on the coordinating--

J: Not at all.

D: I don't remember the coordinating council being the problem. I felt the problem was our own egalitarian way of being. That we wanted to avoid the more patriarchal concept of---"what we say is right". We wanted to hear from other people. I think that's the part that didn't work.

J: Yeah. That's what I meant. That the coordinating council was the format that we used to get to that goal. That's what I meant. So we slipped from president, vice-president. But the coordinating council itself remained solid 'til the end and we worked beautifully together. I think and it was a great---that was the one good thing. The relationships on coordinating council were the good things that came of the coordinating council. That the whole idea that it was born to spread out the leadership was, in my opinion, a mistake.

K: Because---things didn't get done or---

J: Because the membership was not ready to take that kind of responsibility and was too divided in its own goals. And there were some hidden agendas of which we were not even aware that were able to grow in that atmosphere.

K: What were---do you know what those hidden agendas are now? Or did they come out after the group folded?

J: I think there were---I think there were some subversive groups that wanted to see the group fail. That literally infiltrated the ranks.

K: For example?

J: When groups are under cover that's why they're under cover. I mean, I don't know but I think some of them were government sponsored. I think some of them were political.

subversive
agenda

K: But because they wanted members to join their groups or do you feel like---

J: No. They did not want this to succeed. They wanted this to fall.

K: But so it wasn't that they wanted other members of the group---

J: No, I don't think so.

K: So there weren't people from black liberation groups---

J: I think there were a couple of socialist organizations that wanted---and they kept something cooking all the time. And I think they would have siphoned off any fall off that there was.

D: If you all could help me with my language here, I'm going to say this probably very awkwardly, but if you're dealing with a group of black women, you're dealing with a group of people who have had the least nurturing in terms of their esteem and their self-value---that we haven't been valued by the culture. And I feel that we had a lot of problems within our own emotional, psychological development that also made it difficult for us to get along with each other. I think that was also part of--- [interruption] We needed a lot more work on ourselves and what I also remember---I remember being at meetings and realizing that I was with a group of very articulate women who were used to being "the only ones." They were used to going someplace and usually in a group of white folk or other black people who were not as expressive verbally as they and wowing the group and being the only one. And here there were a whole group of us and I think for many women that first time experience---they didn't adapt well. And so we were used to being "the one" that people listened to. I don't think we adapted very well to that.

★
inter-
group
competitiveness

K: So do you feel like that added a competitiveness to the group?

D: Um-hm. I think it did. Or ego problems with various egos that took us away from our group goals. That we needed personally to be fed in ways that if the organization was to survive and do well, we needed to put some of our own needs aside and personal needs have to be met as well as group needs. And I think we needed probably, if I were doing such a group, I'd make sure that there was, again, that there was some way for personal needs to be met.

★
personal
needs vs.
org. goals

J: I agree with that. It was beautifully said. She needed no help whatsoever. Fabulously said.

K: So were you all coming out of experiences in other organizations, like women's---were you involved with any other women's liberation groups or black liberation groups or civil rights organizations?

J: Well, I had had some civil rights experience but women weren't featured in civil rights organizations. You are aware of that?

K: Um-hm.

J: The civil rights is one of the most sexist movements we had.

K: They were working behind the scenes and not getting the credit.

J: That is right. Extrordinarily sexist activity, but I had worked with a couple of those and I had been in--- trying to think. Women's Political Caucus.

previous
activism

K: How about you, Eugenia? Were you involved with any other organizations?

Eugenia: Civil rights stuff while I was at school—high school. Nothing major that I remember.

K: Deborah, how about you?

D: I was 21. I was a mere babe. I had no experience in women's groups.

E: What we did have going for us is that we were dreamers. We really believed in what we were doing and that it was possible and that things could change and would change. And there was really no doubt about that and I think that's what's different between then and now. I don't think that there are dreamers anymore.

J: Yes, I agree with that.

K: What are some of the ideological differences or arguments that you recall people getting into.

D: I remember it more like examples. When I heard the word "feminism" although I hadn't done that much reading about it, I immediately got a very clear image of what that meant. So when we are talking about fundraising and someone talked about doing a fashion show, I immediately thought, "That's wrong." And I'm not so sure—

J: Right. I remember that, too!

D: Maybe it wasn't wrong. I never thought about it. But I remember I immediately thought—

E: It was immediately reactive.

D: I immediately thought, "Gee, a fashion show is anti—, actually anti-feminism," but because fashion shows are something that women do to raise money, that's what they did. And even if they had talked about an alternative clothing fashion show maybe, but I thought, "Fashion show? Oh my god." And another example for me was we were doing a fundraiser at Town Hall featuring women performers and I went to one of the rehearsals and someone was rehearsing "Love for Sale." And I remember my eyes [got wide], I said, "Oh my god." I ran back and found Jane and I said, "Jane! Jane! Jane! Jane, they're doing 'Love for Sale,'" and to me that song, which I didn't even listen to all the way through was definitely had—wasn't something that you would sing in a feminist fundraiser. It wasn't an appropriate song.

Town Hall
fundraising

J: It's funny I had forgotten that. I remember that, too.

K: What other incidents stand out like that one?

J: Well, I think—we had people that felt that the group—feminism is an interesting—a very interesting—it's the best example of people seeing and hearing what they want to see. All of the spokespeople of the feminist movement during the seventies—I'm talking about the big time spokespeople. The great majority of them were heterosexual. Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, what's her name that wrote the book?

E: Betty Friedan?

J: Betty Friedan. I can't remember. They were all heterosexual women. In the black feminist movement the people that came out shooting big guns at first were also—Eleanor Holmes Norton, who was the woman who has the print shop now? Used to be Flo Kennedy's?

E: Dorothy Pittman Hughes.

J: And even though that is the case people have this notion, "Oh yeah, well, you know, if they had a man they wouldn't be pro-woman." And it's much like the race thing. You know, if you're pro-black it doesn't mean you have to be anti-white. And to be pro-female does not mean you have to be anti-male. But because

we were going with the feminist notion and people had their own ideas about what that meant, we had one of the constant on-going debates was about it being a gay organization, which it never was, was never intended to be, and that was not the point. But that kept raising its head in---many years, many years.

and lesbians as "problem" vs,

E: Did it?

J: Yes. Shouldn't this be this. Then, on the other hand, we had those people when we just as women---we would want to take a stand on a position that had to do with gay women we got the overwhelming groundswell of people that felt, "Oh, no! Don't touch that. That's not what we want to be about."

homophobia as the problem

E: That I remember. The first part I don't remember.

D: Because we had a committee called "Triple Oppression".

J: Don't you remember that whole Philadelphia group that felt that, you know, we had to thrust forward being gay? I'm sorry what were you saying? *Boston? Cambridge?*

D: We had to thrust forward being gay? Pro-gay?

J: Yeah.

D: I missed it.

J: And then we had the other side---

E: But they kind of went off and did their thing.

J: Yeah, they did, but she was asking for the different kinds of things that had affected us and I'm just saying that had raised its head several times as I recall and we never gave into because it was not our point. That's not what we wanted to be about. We wanted to be about women, not any gay women, straight women. We wanted to be about women.

definition of women; all-encompassing not recognizing dominance of heterosexual

D: We did have a committee called "Triple Oppression: Being Black, Female, and Lesbian," and they formed to deal with some of the gay issues.

K: But instead of just being about including, just merely including those issues, people wanted the whole organizational focus to be about---

J: Some did. Some did. You were asking about the different types of things.

E: But I think it's to the credit of the organization that that was not what split it---ever.

J: No. It wasn't. That's not what stood, it never did stand, it never read. It never took hold, but it was raised on several occasions. And in the other side it was raised on several occasions.

because the lesbians (or most vocal ones) left & formed org.

[interruption: It was Deborah's 45th birthday on the 27th.]

J: So that was one piece. Another thing that I think came up quite often was the whole socialist notion. I very ignorantly used to call them, jokingly, "the Commies," but we had a group of people that came and they were constantly trying to get us to go with some nah, nah, nah, NAH!

D: Very vocal, very constant. In the middle you could be talking about finances and they'd bring up socialism, often at times that seemed inappropriate. They were very intense.

K: Persistent.

D: Very persistent.

K: I remember that from college.

D: Really.

K: Yeah.

E: But also see the other side of it is that people were given the opportunity to grow. And to take hold of some aspect of something and run with it. I think that helped a lot of people in terms of having a defined role and a place for something to do. Maybe I'm just speaking from my piece of it, which was the media committee. I think at one point we had maybe five members, six members something like that and we targeted television networks. I think at one point people were watching to see what we approved of, what we didn't. And we wrote letters and stuff like that. I don't have a clear memory of a lot of the stuff that we did, but I remember it was always something that was being done.

media
watch
(1974
press
conferences)

J: It was kind of watch-dogging how the media treated and affected black women. We were second on board for the anti-Mammy maid thing. And then it was raised and we jumped right on it.

who was first?
black orgs?
Black Liberator
orgs?

E: And we hooked up with Women Make Movies, which was, still is, as far as I know an organization of women making movies. But it was something that we channeled people into who were interested in that. That's one of the positives.

K: Did you feel that the organization had any political ideology of its own? Liberal or—I mean, you said the socialists came in and tried to take over. Because they felt the organization was too liberal-minded or wanted to work within the system.

J: I think liberal is probably as close as we would come to any type of political ideology. That's not what we were about.

E: [REDACTED]

J: That's right. Exactly right.

E: Even child care and motherhood. It was whatever black women needed or thought that we should have. It was trying to create a venue to get that.

J: Our whole thing was to look at all issues and how they would affect black women, women of color. That was our whole thing. All of the different types of things that came up. How did that affect black women? I remember there was an issue around women in the military.

E: That's wild. Think of it now.

J: Think of it now. It's now an antique issue. But I remember Eleanor Holmes Norton talking about be careful of putting down women who want to be in the military because black women are always in the forefront of non-traditional employment and usually because we need the benefits more than anyone else. Being at the very bottom of the food chain when it comes to employment and economics. And that always stuck with me and, of course, when I see the news now it's so strange. I remember working and people talk about "What is feminism now? What has been accomplished?" I remember working on a non-sexist, multicultural school curriculum and I remember what a job it was to get a female fire fighter and a female police officer to come and talk to a kindergarten class role modeling non-traditional employment. And now you can get one by—you don't even have to blink your eye. Just call 'em and say, "I want one." I mean we had to—whew—go through the rosters. "You can come down if you want to and you can look at see if—" I mean, it was a mess. And they were where?!? Where? The women on construction crews—I remember going out and taking classes to see them; out there waving the flag or whatever they were doing. The fact that they were in workboots and hardhats just was phenomenal. And now it's just everyday. It's common. is it?

D: And remember the meeting we had? The discussion we had around the women boxers?

J: Yes! Tiger! Remember that woman's name was Tiger. Remember her?

D: Yes. Should she speak at a meeting or should she not? And we ultimately decided to have her come to a meeting.

J: That was the whole thing.

K: Because she was involved with fighting so that was...

J: She was a fighter.

D: So is that feminist or is it anti-feminist?

J: I remember that. Tiger was her name.

E: Was she small though? Slight?

J: Yeah she---no she wasn't slight, but she was short.

D: She was short, but she was powerfully built.

K: So how do you think the organization was viewed by other organizations? Do you recall were people in other groups---like you mentioned Women Make Movies---do you recall working with any other groups?

E: I think for a while that we were taken seriously as a viable organization. I think the fact that people like Eleanor Holmes Norton or Steinem or any of them. You know, prominent black and white women in the movement then would become involved, help, assist, whatever, acknowledge, all of that.

J: I remember we were trying to get some people to sign---I don't remember what it was about. Might have been the abortion petition 'cause that, again, is ancient history but I remember that we were coming along right at the time that Italy---remember---was having the whole big thing. France and all. And we had a petition or something and I remember that Dorothy Height was very helpful and she was quite positively vocal about our existence and, of course, she is probably the most powerful black woman in the world. She doesn't get credit for it but she certainly is. So I was delighted that she was so positive because there were people that felt she wouldn't be. And she could not have been nicer---more supportive.

E: I remember that conference that we had a Riverside Church. What was that called?

J: What Riverside? St. John the Divine.

E: No, Riverside because I remember being in the church building and the elevators and all of that. That's Riverside.

J: Riverside. Well, we had another one at St. John the Divine.

D: No, I think she's thinking of St. John the Divine. Aren't you thinking of St. John the Divine?

E: I'm saying Riverside. Jane is saying St. John.

J: I know we had one at St. John.

E: I read about that one.

D: I remember St. John. I don't remember Riverside.

K: The Eastern Regional with Flo Kennedy, Shirley Chisholm---

J: Alice Walker, Shirley Chisholm spoke.

E: Well, see I'm asking because I don't remember who was there. But I know we did. We had workshops and we sent people to different rooms in the building and that was Riverside.

J: Well, then that was another one. It doesn't come easily to my mind. I'm not saying it didn't happen.

K: Was there something in particular there that happened or are you just recalling---

E: No. I would like some help in remembering what it was.

J: At St. John we had a tremendous amount of mainstream support. Aileen Hernandez, Flo Kennedy, Shirley Chisholm. Oh god, I wish I had a program from it. Flo Snell might have some of that stuff, you know. She took those files.

K: They covered some of the events in *off our backs* so I was able to read about a lot of the events there.

J: Oh, okay. Really?

K: How do you feel the organization was viewed by the black community, in general?

J: Well, I think that feminism was not the most popular notion in the black community. I think black women were very welcoming of it. Thus spoken by the fact that we were inundated by desire for membership when we announced ourselves---from all over the country. So I think black women not only needed the organization tremendously and gained a lot from it. And even if it's just from the standpoint of the spin-offs. I think that men have always had a problem with feminism. Large numbers of men, not all. I know some that allegedly don't, but great numbers of men find feminism to be a threat just like white people find black organizations that promote---y'know. Well, I don't want to get into it. There's a person now that speaks a lot of truth and he's castigated constantly and I was embarrassed the other day hearing him on television because I was "Oh, he needs to stop this stuff!" And I said, "Well, that man he made more sense than anybody."

D: I know who you're talking about and it's true.

J: And it's the kind of thing where feminism took a bad rap. We had a huge disagreement with a black journalist, a female, black journalist. That after we had our conference she put us down, she wrote terrible---

K: Brenda Veneer?

J: No, uh, she was Faith thing's daughter.

D: Oh, Michelle Wallace.

J: She wrote scathing articles about us.

K: She claims to have been a founding member, so---

J: She what?

K: She claims to have been a founding member.

J: Well, that's just absolutely untrue. When you see her again ask her to send me some of her drugs. That's absolutely not---she was nowhere, nowhere to be seen and did nothing but try to drag us down. Trashed us unmercifully to the fact---with nothing but lies. With nothing but lies. She didn't bother to come to some of our meeting and I don't know whether she sent somebody or whether she would just lie in her bed and imagine, but what she did was she would write things about our meetings that were not even close! So what happened? So Michelle needs to get a grip. I have a lot of respect for her book *Superwoman* and I know that she went through a lot of pain after it was published and all of that. And I'm very sympathetic to her for that, but when it comes to NBFO she was worse than any white man could ever have been. She was hideous. And founding member? HA!

Michelle
Wallace

We had a problem with uh---oh! *Essence*. Ida Lewis. She called the police on me and Margaret.

K: Why?

J: Because we went up there to fight with her and argue with her about the fact that we thought it was hideous that *Essence Magazine* had take such a position. And she told us she wanted us to leave and we told her her weren't going to leave until we talked with her.

K: She had written an article already?

J: She was the editor. And the article had been in the magazine and it was very negative. ~~to I have this article???~~ And Margaret and I said, "No, no, no. That's terrible." And the most successful black women's magazine to say these things and hadn't even been to the conference and trashed the conference.

Wrote pretty
positive article
abt. St. Grazing;
other articles?
a conference?

D: [inaudible]

J: No, it was *Essence*.

It was contact *essence?*
(see Sloan interview)

E: She was there before Susan Taylor.

J: Yeah. And we went up there to her office and she said that we had to leave, that she wasn't going to see us and we said, "Oh yes. She is." We were going to either see her or get an appointment.

D: We went up with a group of women at some point. Was that a separate time?

J: No, I think it was that time and the next thing we knew here came the New York City Police.

K: So do you think they trashed the NBFO because of this whole competition issue or just because of ideas they had about feminism?

J: Yeah, I think so. I think it was ideas they had about feminism. I think it was---you know, I don't know why.

D: It was threatening to them in some way.

J: We were threatening in some way. And I have seen Ida since then and she could not have been more pleasant. In fact, we laughed about the day she called the cops. But that was, I have to say, at least thirty years later.

K: So what do you think the organization accomplished? What were the positive things that you did? I mean, you mentioned women's self-esteem and helping in that way.

E: I like the fact that there is a record, even though I really didn't know there was one, but there is a record that the organization existed. That women---black women did do this. You know, I don't have a clear sense of what it accomplished maybe because it would be egotistical. I got a lot of personal stuff out of it. So, for

that---you can't put a price on that, but it has a tremendous value. I have relationships that have been maintained since that time, to some degree. I'm very happy about that.

J: I think that the personal gratification---

E: And also---let me interrupt you---and because the relationships developed out of work, out of a process. Out of a common goal and struggle and fights and tears and all of that. That is tremendously important because we've all been tested over and over again.

K: So was it being able to have some sort of communion with women who had the same ideas.

E: Yeah.

J: Yeah. Well, I think that what was accomplished---I think that a tremendous amount---more than we will ever, ever, ever, ever know was accomplished. I was walking in the street the other day and a woman came over to me and she said, "Is your name Jane?" And I said, "Yes, it is." And you have a last name is two names, right? And I said, "Yes, I do." And she said, "I will never forget you." And thought to myself, "Oh my god..."

E: "What did I do?"

J: And she said, "I was in NBFO. My name was blah blah. Do you remember me?" "Gee," I said, "I have to be honest with you I don't." And she said, "You will never know how that organization changed my life." And I think there are a million of her out there. In Detroit, in Chicago, in San Francisco, Boston, all over this country. Because the bottom line is that we were---I mean, I've known feminists---this is not my thinking. There's someone that always says the first feminist was Eve. And so we really shouldn't keep talking about the first wave and the second wave because there's been one great big wave. So I am quite sure that if we went back and we looked that we would find black women---you know, Sojourner Truth might not have called herself a feminist 'cause that was not the terminology back then, but if we were to talk to her---her "Ain't I a Woman?" is perfect. It's perfect. It's a different slant, but I think that if we were to have talked with her, she would have agreed with us about a lot of things. Harriet Tubman. Lord Have mercy! I mean, she was breaking the mold constantly. So I say all that to say that I don't want to say that we were the first to do it etc. History is about putting points in different spots and if you have to put a point in a spot, we started a lot of people thinking about a lot of stuff. We started a lot of people thinking about the fact that we got the vote with women in 1920 and not in 1865 with black man. We started the thinking about that. We started black women thinking about not being guilty for wanting to be about their goals. Juxtapositioned with The Black Movement. You know, Margaret Sloan had a lot of people thinking [end side 1]

[side 2]

So we started each other thinking about a lot of stuff and a lot of women out there who were just kind of lost and trying to find their way. We didn't show them a path, but we sure did let them know that they were not by themselves and speak up and keep on truckin' and come to these meetings if you want to, sister. We were the first group that I knew of that had a goal every week, every single meeting we had a speaker that had something to do with, you know, do you need your food stamps? Do you need daycare? Do you need, you know, what is it you need? *

K: So not just theoretical arguments but you also had people coming in to address women's practical needs?

J: Yeah! We were the first group that tried to get away from this---another argument that came up all the time was this class issue. God! I mean---ugh. So boring. But we did start---we had meetings for people that had money, we had meetings for people that didn't, we had financial specialists, and we had food stamp specialists. Okay, so we really were trying to harness "black femaleness"---and we did. We achieved that. We threw that out there. We threw it out there nationally. I find that phenomenal. Phenomenal! I was in

class

Los Angeles about four years ago, five years ago and a woman walked up to me and was talking about the film. She recognized me from another film called, "I Be, Done Been, Was, Is". It's a film about black women comics. And she said, "Aren't you---" And I said, "Yes." And she said, "Oh, I was at a meeting the other night and they showed this film and you can get it from the library here." And I said, "Oh, that's wonderful yadda yadda ya." And she said, "But I remember you from NBFO. I was a member." And she named the woman out there---I'm sorry I'm just bad on names---but that woman stuck 'til the end. I can't remember---the tall, thin woman from Los Angeles. And she kept that group---I think that she was---I could be wrong about this, but if I'm not mistaken Los Angeles was the last NBFO chapter to finally fold up and become something else [what?]. Because for years after New York had long ago said, "Aw, Lord, please go on, y'all."

D: Why don't we become something else? Why don't we start a group now.

J: Oh god! [laughter] She was calling me and saying, "What does the coordinating council think?" And I kept saying to her, "Sweetheart the coordinating council doesn't meet anymore." But I mean, they were still hanging on and I find that amazing that seven women got together in New York City and literally affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of black women across the nation. So we accomplished a hell of a lot. It was a tremendous amount of pain, but we accomplished waves and waves and waves. Oceans full. People were not talking about black women on television and how they were seen. People were not talking about that. Now it's no big thing. Then it was a huge issue. Women on Wall Street. I mean, god! We were very, very forward thinking. Some of the issues that we dealt with are still issues today. So we did---the whole thing of childcare and control of your body. We were on it and we did bring a feminist concept to the black community. Because there were a lot of women that saw feminism as a white, racist ideology and really didn't want to hear from nothing. And in many instances the concepts were ones that we needed more than anybody else. Nutrition and all kinds of thing. Control of your own body, female abuse.

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D: I understand from the research that was done in the seventies that when the issues of feminism were listed that it was black women who supported them in the larger numbers.

J: That's right.

D: And supported them saying---they verbally supported them. That they agreed with the terms of---

K: With the goals of the women's movement?

D: Yes.

J: Yeah, it was kind of like, "Now don't get me wrong. I'm not a feminist, but I agree with equal pay for equal work. Now don't get me wrong! I'm not a feminist, but I think women should control their own bodies. Now don't get me wrong!"

D: And that was a problem with the media. That media portrayed feminism.

J: That's right. Portrayed feminism.

K: Deborah, how about you? What did you feel you got from the group.

D: Well, on my forty-fifth birthday, let me reflect that. Who I am today--- [J: How old?] forty-five. See I could barely say it.

J: Gee wiz.

E: Don't you want to smack her?

D: Why? What do you mean?

J: 'Cause you look ten. And Eugenia, don't you even start. You look twelve.

D: But you look older than me.

E: That's cause I am.

J: I'm the only one who looks seventy-two.

D: Who I am today is inseparable from what I got out of being in the National Black Feminist Organization. For one, when I joined that group I definitely—I was straight out of the projects. I couldn't talk. I had no sense of self. I was so unformed that the first time Jane or Margaret called my name, I was shocked that they knew my name. Just amazed me. And from listening to the women of NBFO talk, it resonated with what I had been feeling unformed by words. And I got to the point that I've learned to—I credit Jane and Margaret and the other women of NBFO with teaching me to talk. I literally did not talk before NBFO. And now [singsong] "Look at me I'm walkin'. Look at me, I'm talkin'."

J: [joining in with song]

K: What do you do now?

D: I'm an artist, an astrologer, a writer, a teacher.

J: Deborah's paintings have, on two occasions, closed the *New Yorker Magazine*. The back page.

K: Do you remember the dates? I'd like to see it.

D: What you would really like to see is my real work. But the only date I really remember is April '96. Their "Black Issue" and their "Music Issue".

K: Eugenia, did I ask you what you do now? What your occupation is?

E: Well, right now I work for the school board. New York City Board of Education.

K: So were you a teacher at one point and now you do administrative.

E: No.

D: Eugenia, you don't consider yourself a writer? You don't identify yourself as a writer?

E: No, because I haven't published anything in ages. Although writing is a major part of my job.

K: But you've been published before? What format?

E: Magazines.

K: Essays or fiction?

E: Um—I did an interview for *MS.* and I did stuff for *Uniquely You* [right title?].

D: And there was a book called *Women in the Year 2000*. She was---she wrote under the name "Dorothy Robinson" at that time. But Inez, I think Inez Singeltary or Inez Turner---I forget her name---and myself. We were contributing editors along with Margo Jefferson, who is Pulitzer Prize winner. And Margo Jefferson was also a member of NBFO. We're so proud of her.

K: What did she win the prize for?

E: Last year for essays.

D: For journalism. Is it essays in particular?

J: Yeah, it was journalism.

E: Commentary maybe. But you know a Pulitzer's a Pulitzer.

K: So did you all stay in the organization until the very end or until it ended in New York?

J: Yeah.

K: So what were the reasons that it folded?

E: I think people were just tired and worn out, too. That had a lot to do with it. I don't remember when it ended. I don't really remember.

D: I remember being at one meeting. We had a conference on racism and sexism in the women's movement and I'll go out on a limb here, but I remember someone getting up and saying, "What about socialism?!" And then there was a woman maybe down the way who stood up and said, "And what about such-and-such?!" And what I saw was the coordinating council and the women who had organized this conference and we worked in coalition with—do you remember the group? Blanche and Joan was in that group?

Sagaris?
summer
'75? '76?
no, Radical
Women

J: Oh yeah!

E: Maybe that was Riverside.

D: Was it Radical Women?

J: That was Riverside Church. Okay. That's right.

D: That was Riverside. And what I remember was it dawned on me that their interruptive marks were strategic.

J: Yes.

D: And before—and I saw us stop what we were doing and answer those questions. And later I thought, "Oh, we missed the boat there." We were on our way towards the end. But I really do feel and I do not have any—I'm speaking on intuition and we know that that's worth a whole lot in this world, don't we? I'm working on intuition here, but it seems to me that those interruptions were too strategic to be just the rantings of some women who did not respect the structure. And because we were not—I feel that we were so naïve we never considered that any government body would pay is enough attention to send—what are they called?

provocateurs

K: Agent provocateurs.

D: Is that what they're called? It never occurred to us. It never occurred to me anyway. That they would.

J: Yeah. But it did occur to me later.

D: And I'm sure. Now I feel very strongly that that's what happened and we fell for it.

J: And we also had women that—Margaret and I were talking about this about a year ago—that just latched on. We had a nickname for one of them. Turn your tape recorder off for a moment.

...downfall. And I shouldn't say "downfall" because we didn't really downfall. We just kind of "let go". Another piece of it was in our desire for egalitarianism, we didn't put down our foot early enough on the ideology and politics of NBFO. And by the time we did that there had been two groups, in particular, that had taken hold and created what we allowed to be an argument. We had no business even allowing it to be a debate, but we were so busy saying, "Oh, we're not going to be like other organizations. We're not going to say the we're running stuff." And the irony---the IRONY in it was that that's what they accused us of anyway. I will never forget the "founding mother's conversation". So we had gone out of our way to be open and when we were accused of not being---and I don't know how they arrived at that conclusion 'cause lord knows we had let everything including the "wet cats association" have a committee.

decline

E: What?

J: Meaning anything. But by the time we finally said, "Look, if you wanna do it that way. Form your own." They had already gotten their foot---they had wedged the door so open that when we got to the floor at one of our conventions, they had organized a movement against the founders.

K: In D.C.

D: Yes.

J: Was that D.C. or Detroit?

D: D.C.

J: And the D.C. group for some reason was just hostile. They did not want---they just did not want peace. And I never found---I never really knew whether it was because they were in with that socialist stuff 'cause some of them were. Whether they were just the young Turks, you know, were feeling their oats and wanting to take over. I didn't know what but for some reasons---there was nothing we could do. They said, "We wanna meet." "Okay let's meet. What time?" "Four o'clock." "No, seven." "Okay, seven." "No, eight." "Okay, eight." "No, Sunday." "Okay, Sunday." I mean, they just jerked us around and we were so anxious. And I was very frightened because I saw the organization dissolving and I was so anxious not to let that happen that I fell for the old ploy. It's like driving a car in the snow. When you go into a skid, you turn into the skid. That's what straightens you out. But your immediate response is to pull away from the skid.

decline
D.C.

D: Alright. Ooh. I'm gonna use that one.

J: And that's what I was---did was [sounding anxious] to say, "Margaret, let's do everything we can to see that they feel that we're with 'em because we really are. We don't have anything against them. We're really with them." I saw them tearing the thing apart. And instead of just pulling back and saying, "Lemme tell you something. You want it on Sunday at two? Then go meet with your goddamn self! You said you wanted it Saturday at four and we went along with you. Now fuck off." Instead of that we changed to Sunday etc. and nothing would satisfy them. And when we finally got to the convention floor, they voted some Constitutional changes to the Constitution. And I tell you very honestly, Kim, it's probably because I just don't want to remember, but whatever those changes were---were endemic to destruction. And they then said 'cause I remember you and I were walking down the path to the meeting. Remember that?

D: Um-hm. Yes.

J: And I was almost in tears because I knew the vote was messed up because I had seen a bunch of them meeting by a car and they [making shush-ing noises]. And I said, "Awww, boy." And we then said, "Alright. You want to see this differently. Then how do you see it?" And after they made these changes they said, "We want the records. We want the books. We're going to call a meeting as soon as we get back to New York." And we called and called and called Audrey Barnes and old so-and-so. "Come get the books. Come get the bleh. Don't you want to have a meeting?" And they then, literally, let the organization die. They destroyed the old structure and I think that was deliberate. And they just never called a meeting.

D: And actually, I think it was suicide. And I saw suicide because we acted on what they were doing and, I feel, neglected to ask the question, "Why are they doing this?" And if we had asked the "why" question, that we would have gotten to who we are as black women. We were dealing with a lot of self-hate. Now to our credit--to everybody's credit--even the women who ultimately destroyed the organization we still we trying to heal ourselves, but it was like performing an operation with a butcher knife. We didn't have--I didn't think we had the right tools or the right self-analysis. And if I had--I wish I could be a scholar because I'd do some writing about self-hate. I really feel that self-hate had a lot to do with what happened to the National Black Feminist Organization. What the coordinating council was--now if you think that--now remember we were called the "founding mothers". What relationship do most women have with their mothers?

K: Adversarial?

D: Very adversarial. So we being "mothers" I believe became the projection. Y'all aren't helping me. That those women projected their issues onto us. So when they sought to destroy us, it was really themselves. It was really about their own self-hatred, which we manifested. "How dare you form an organization? How dare you be so articulate? How dare you be so pretty? How dare you write so well? How dare you be so courageous?" So they were actually, by destroying the organization, they were actually engaged in self--

E: Annihilation

J: Yeah. And I think, too, it would be very interesting--what I would love to do is see some of them now. Let me re-phrase that. I would not like to see some of them now. What I would like to do is observe some of them now. Be a fly on the wall. Because I think that they now can look back and regret their actions. I think they can see some of the sincerity because we had our faults. People on the coordinating council, of course, we had our faults. And of course we had ego involved, we had other kinds of things happening. I mean, you know, we did, but boy I'll tell you. You'll never meet a more dedicated and sincere group of people. I mean really, wanting to make the thing work and we started reaching out. When they started acting up, it was out of total--first it was out of total wanting to try to work together. And then it was just out of desperation. And they saw blood. And I think that--I can think of some--what Deborah said--when Deborah talked about relationships to your mother. I can remember some of the worst arguments that I had with my mother that I could not agree with her more right now. Just sit down and say, "Child, please, you are so right." And I think that these women, as time has let them stand away from the situation fully understand, too.

D: Well, we hope so.

K: Was everyone the same age?

D: No. We were all young. I was in my early 20s, but I think Jane was in her 30s. You are a good ten years older than me.

J: I think I am, Deborah [laughing].

D: Actually, she's not. When you were younger everybody seems older. Now we're the same age.

K: So were these women who were younger?

J: Some were younger, but some weren't.

D: We were in our 30s. Largely in our 30s.

J: And some of the destroyers were young and some of them weren't. Like [unnamed] were much older than many of us and some weren't. Laurie---

D: But she was the only one.

J: [unnamed] was old, too.

D: No, she wasn't. We were in our 30s, maybe early 40s some of us. But we were really relatively young.

K: Do any of you know others whereabouts who I should talk to?

D: I know Inez Singletary's number. She's in Los Angeles. Might be nice to get a perspective from someone---

J: Yes, and she would be able to tell you the woman's name out there that hung on for so long.

K: So she was involved in L.A.?

D: No, she lived here. She re-located. 213.254.8314. She might have some interesting analyses.

K: Is there anything you want to add or you feel like I should have asked.

D: Well, I'm sure this came up. Just to be on the safe side. A lot of the issues that they factions had had to do with power. They were afraid of us--the coordinating council having too much power. And I remember a statement that Jane Galvin-Lewis made saying, "What are they talking about? Power over an unpaid telephone bill?" I remember everything you said. And I don't know what that means, but somehow I think the fact that they perceived us as having too much power. That that was their fear, I think is significant. But I'll leave that up to you to work it out. *

K: Is there anything you'd like to add [to Eugenia]?

E: No.

[interruption]

J: I just think that the organization was extraordinarily important. More important than we knew, than we set out to have it be--

E: Or will ever be given credit for.

J: Or will ever be given credit for.

D: What made you decide to do this?

K: Being a black feminist myself---

D: So there are still black feminists out there?

K: [yakking]